

Children, Families, Health & Human Services Interim Committee
January 19, 2018, Room 102 State Capitol Bldg.
Public Comment By: Vicki LaFond-Smith

Good Morning, Senator Caferro and Members of the Committee, my name is Vicki LaFond-Smith [spell]. I have three sons, Christopher and Matthew-twins and Timothy. We live in the East Helena Valley together in our family home. Christopher and Matthew were born 3 ½ months premature weighing just under 2 lbs. They both have significant disabilities resulting from their unexpected premature birth. They have the courage to face every day the challenges of cerebral palsy, left-side hemi-palegia, autism, scoliosis, lung disease, wheelchair, hydrocephalus, oxygen use, blindness, g-tube feeding, and severe cognitive disabilities. They are 27 years old, but more like 3 to 5 year olds.

Every day, Christopher and Matthew rely on the *community-based services waiver* and *Community First Choice personal attendant services and supports* to help them live in our family's home, in our community. And the twins rely on me. We want to stay together in our home. We don't want them in a group home, nursing home, or an institutional place like MDC.

I am here today speaking on behalf of Christopher and Matthew and our family, but I am also carrying forward to you my deep concerns for all individuals and families and their communities, because we have all been greatly impacted by the budget cuts resulting from the 2017 Legislative Session and Special Session.

I have chosen to self-direct services for the Twins. The reason I chose this is because money from a State Plan that is paid to agencies includes administrative fees and costs; thru self-direct that money goes directly to the care for the Twins, so their budgets go farther. I spend no less than 20 unpaid hours a week self-directing their services.

Consumer Direct is the agency that I work with to oversee the personal attendant services (direct care staff that provide personal care, describe) for the Twins. Acumen is the agency I work with to oversee their State Plans—money that pays for all other services. Approx. 98% of their annual State Plan budgets pay direct care staff; the rest to transportation reimbursement, therapeutic exercise and needed equipment & equipment repairs.

Budget Cuts

Impact on Direct Care Staff's Pay. Consumer Direct (CD) pays direct care staff max. rate of \$11.65/hr—I am competing for staff with nursing home and care facilities that pay a starting rate of \$12.75/hr. in our area. Acumen pays staff max. \$17.28/hr. As of January 8th CD rate is the same, no cost of living increase. Acumen also did not provide a cost of living increase, in fact reduced hourly rate by 54 cents, now max. rate is \$16.74. On Jan. 8th I received the rate reduction information from Acumen and told that the reduction begins on Jan. 8th and that I had to notify my staff by Jan. 8th. No time to prepare me or my devoted, well-trained, compassionate staff with families of their own, for this impact to all of our budgets. For decades we have lobbied for increase in direct care staff's pay rates. And very slowly over time, increases have been provided, however still not enough to keep up with the private industry. Now, we have taken all increases away in one fell swoop—54 cents an hour less.

Impact of State Cost Plan.

\$261,452 – Is the amount of the highest cost plan at MDC. I am certain that would be the cost plan for Christopher. Christopher - \$100,087.16.

\$216,134 – Is the amount of an average cost plan at MDC. I am certain the cost plan for Matthew would be somewhere between the average and the highest amount. Matthew - \$102,098.15.

DPHHS has known for well over 20 years, that it is more cost effective to provide services in the community than in an institution. Deep cuts in the budget that have been made make it hard to keep them home. I don't see how MDC will be able to move 21 people in two years into communities and provide their necessary supports when there is already a waiting list in excess of 1,500 people. And this Spring, we can add to that all of the young adults graduating from High School Special Education and transitioning into adult services that were discussed yesterday. They are all competing. I am fearful for what amounts the Twins' State Plan budgets will be on July 1, 2018, when the new fiscal year begins. I hope at a minimum, it stays the same, no reductions.

Impact on Case Management Services. My understanding was that, historically, the state case managers couldn't meet all of the needs for case management services, and DPHHS found that they could meet the needs and provide the service more cost effectively by contracting it out vs. keeping it within DPHHS. The budget cuts have eliminated all contracted case management services. It happens that we have a state case manager so we will not have to adjust to a new one. However, my state case manager has just been given more cases. I am fearful that she won't be there when I need her—we will fall thru the cracks. And what about all the other individuals and families who rely on their case managers just as I do, to help me find the resources in our community that we need? Case management services are essential to the success of individuals with special needs' ability to live at home and in their community. The lack of effective case management will lead to failure. And what happens to all of the agencies and people who lost contracts? Will they close down, will they be unemployed? What will the impact on community economies be?

Impact on Essential Supplies Needed for Care and Good Health. Reduction in Medicaid rates for incontinence supplies and durable medical equipment, dental services, eye exams and glasses. Supplies like pull-ups, diapers, g-tube feeding tubes and catheter tip syringes, protective bed pads, gloves for care staff to wear. We utilize all of these things. When rates are reduced, stores quit selling them because they lose too much money—big places like WalMart Pharmacy and CVS Pharmacy. We currently have them shipped UPS from Price Rite in Bozeman to our home in the East Helena valley because we can't find a place locally to provide them. I am fearful they will quit on us too.

Impact from DPHHS. It wasn't only one agency in DPHHS that impacted individuals with disabilities—for most—there are several agencies at DPHHS that provide services for us. Our services collectively are provided by the Developmental Services Division, Senior and Long-Term Care Division, Human and Community Services Division, and Health Resources Division. Services for us were cut in every single area where we have needs.

Impact on Communities Across Montana. Jan. 8th found out that my direct care staff pay decreases 54 cents, beginning Jan. 8th. Jan. 10th found out that personal care services were reduced collectively 5 hours a week for the Twins, beginning Jan. 21st. Contracted case management services were eliminated, DPHHS is trying to transition those services back to DPHHS and I know they formed a work group to do this—in late November. The majority of Montana's kids graduating from High School Special Ed. will be transitioning to waiting lists for adult community services and Voc-Rehab. NO ONE is prepared for what has happened! Our communities need to assess the impact of these budget cuts on their resources. Hospitals, clinics, law enforcement, public assistance—where 19 rural Montana offices are facing closure mandated by the budget cuts. My heart hurts. Are communities across Montana able to fill the gaps? Are families, friends, neighbors and faith communities aware they will likely be called upon to help out? So much time, effort, assessments and planning are spent on developing State Plans for individuals with disabilities, so their needs will be met, they will be cared for, remain happy and healthy in their homes and

communities. All of that work serves a real purpose and impacts a real life. These budget cuts have jeopardized EVERYONE.

Conclusion

I know it's too late to reverse the budget cuts. I know that if DPHHS has emergency funds, they will be quickly used up. I know that when your legislative authority returns with the next session, you will convene to countless stories telling sad and heart-breaking results of the 2017 budget cuts. DPHHS knows better than to cut these services, because it's history has proved it. DPHHS took an *enormous* step backward. It will be your job then, to *restore* the budget in order to do the right thing by our most vulnerable Montanans and their families and communities.